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Nuclear Mishaps Haunt Soviets

The Soviet government's appallingly cavalier attitude toward the dangers of nuclear power came as no surprise to us. Two years ago this month, when we reported secret details of earlier Soviet nuclear accidents, the Soviet Embassy here responded with a smart-aleck letter ridiculing our revelations.

The wisecracks of the embassy information officer, Eugene Zykov, must have turned to ashes in his mouth since the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl last month. His letter's tone of sarcasm and braggadocio was inappropriate in light of what now is confirmed about the Soviets' failure to build and maintain nuclear reactors with a rudimentary concern for safety.

One grim disclosure we made two years ago, citing secret and top secret CIA reports, was that many hairless sailors were in Soviet veterans' homes, suggesting overexposure to radiation leaking from faulty nuclear submarine reactors.

This evidently tickled the embassy flack's funny bone. Our story on the "radioactive nightmare" in the Soviet Union, he wrote, "could cause even those 'hairless sailors' . . . to have their hair stand on end."

Zykov continued: "Being too engrossed in his macabre narration, the author failed to mention one more point. No organizations such as 'National Campaign for Radioactive Waste Energy,' 'Supporters of Silkwood' or 'Musicians United for Safe Energy' exist in the USSR . . . They do not exist because we have not had the same problem [as] the nuclear power industry in the U.S."

We suggest that other reasons may explain why antinuclear protest groups do not exist in the

Soviet Union. Ask Andrei Sakharov or the hapless monitors of the Helsinki Accords how the KGB treats outspoken critics of the Soviet regime.

The embassy letter claimed that all Soviet nuclear power stations must have "at least three or four fail-safe systems for protection against radioactivity," and that about half the construction costs go into the protection systems. The letter then lists three government agencies responsible for "overseeing the strictly required safety measures," and added: "That's why it stands to reason that Soviet experience in nuclear power engineering wins recognition among many prominent foreign experts."

The embassy letter then descends to a flat-out lie, stating that "within the last 30 years, the prestige of the Soviet stations has never been undermined by tragic accidents like the one which occurred at Three Mile Island in May 1979."

In fact, the Soviets had two serious reactor shutdowns in the early 1980s, and a near-holocaust in 1957, when carelessly stored nuclear wastes exploded at a plant near Chelyabinsk, rendering hundreds of square miles uninhabitable to this day.

Comrade Zykov stated that people living within two to three miles of Soviet nuclear plants get an annual dose of radiation equivalent to "a few hours on the coast of Miami Beach."

He added: "That is why the USSR plans to construct more stations close to major industrial cities in the European part of the country, to provide heat and energy."

The frightening thing is that the Soviet leaders may do just that.